

# “Hindsight is 20/20:”

## Student Perceptions of Language Learning and the Study Abroad Experience

**Vija G. Mendelson**

*Academic Programs International*

### Introduction

*– I hope to be fluent by the end of the summer... I have a hard time because I slowly try to translate Spanish into English in my head, I want to stop doing that. I hope to become less inhibited, or scared to speak... I don't plan to speak much English at all and I will be mad if I have to. {Laura}*

*– Being immersed in a culture is the best way to acquire a well-rounded understanding of the culture and the language. I am looking forward to this experience and know that the rewards will be worth it. {Melanie}*

*– I feel as though living in a Spanish family and in a predominantly Spanish-speaking culture, I will be forced to adapt and become fluent. HOPEFULLY! {Donna}*

The students quoted above shared pre-program hopes and expectations fairly representative of those who choose to study abroad in Spain each year, a figure that rose to 17,176 in 2001-2002.<sup>1</sup> While there are certainly variations on a theme, differing motivations and goals for study abroad, these expectations echo what educators and administrators often cite when asserting the benefits of a sojourn abroad. Such beliefs among students, educators, and administrators have been fostered and reinforced by prior research that emphasizes the favorable learning outcomes of study abroad. The most important for the project described in this article are those studies which focus on oral proficiency (e.g., Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990; DeKeyser, 1990, 1991; Freed, 1995b; Lafford, 1995; Liskin-Gasparro & Urdaneta, 1995), and the role of out-of-class contact (e.g., Archangeli, 1999; Freed, 1990; Kaplan, 1989; Parr, 1988; Spada, 1984; Yager, 1998).

Only in the past decade have researchers enthusiastically turned to a more qualitative point of departure to understand the nature of the immersion context itself, using open-ended instruments to draw conclusions about students' experiences abroad.

Perhaps sparked by the multifaceted approaches employed in the landmark American Council of Teachers of Russian/National Foreign Language Center (ACTR/NFLC) project (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995; Miller & Ginsberg, 1995), whose second phase focused on “an ethnographic study of the in-country language-learning process, documented by self-report diaries, observations, interviews, and recordings” (1993, p. 2), recent work has stressed the need to respect the voices of individual students, beyond the statistics, in order to better understand their learning process on both an academic and personal level (e.g., Citron, 2002; Laubscher, 1994; Wilkinson, 1995, 1998a, 1998b).

## **The Project**

### **Goals of the Project**

It is often suggested that the principal advantage of study abroad is that it has the power to expand the four walls of the traditional language classroom to include the local streets and people of any given culture. International educators sometimes assume that students who study abroad will not fail to take advantage of the various offerings of their host culture, and that these will have an immediate and beneficial effect on their level of language proficiency. Out-of-class contact, both interactive (with host families and friends) and noninteractive (going to the theatre, cinema or dance classes, listening to music, reading or studying in the language) is often lauded but rarely put to serious investigation. With the exception of a few well-executed studies, for example, Freed (1990) and Yager (1998), few studies challenge the assumptions of the “miracles” of study abroad outside the classroom. Wilkinson (1995) has identified an entire series of such assumptions, which deserve our attention if we hope to improve the articulation between program objectives and program outcomes (pp. 196-199):

- Study abroad ensures miraculous linguistic gains
- Increased non-classroom interaction in the target language is inevitable during a stay abroad
- A host family is preferable to other possible living arrangements
- Deep cultural understanding will result from residence in a foreign country

Gathering student opinions about study abroad experience proves an effective way to address some of the issues these assumptions raise.

## **Participants**

In this project, 31 students who attended UMass Amherst (UMass) 2002 Salamanca Summer Program (four weeks) and 14 students who attended the UMass 2002 Granada Fall Program (14 weeks) agreed to participate. Five of these students, who studied abroad a second time with the UMass 2003 Oviedo Spring Program (18 weeks), also participated in a follow-up to the main study.

## **Methodology**

The Salamanca and Granada participants were administered a series of instruments both pre- and post-program, among these: an oral interview following the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) protocol, the Language Proficiency Self-Evaluation<sup>2</sup> (LPSE), the Entrance Language Contact Profile (LCP), and the Exit LCP.<sup>3</sup> The Entrance LCP gathered demographic information and data on students' prior experiences with the Spanish language, along with their goals and expectations for their upcoming sojourn, while the Exit LCP required students to quantify their out-of-class contact hours in Spain (in the categories of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing), as well as comment on the results of their learning abroad. While on-site, the students completed a language journal, which consisted of a series of thirteen directed entries,<sup>4</sup> three time-place maps,<sup>5</sup> and a mental map, which provided the opportunity for students to create a visual representation of their perception of the host city. In the follow-up to the main study, the Oviedo participants completed a series of three reflective essays to explore how their previous study abroad experience affected their choices the second time around.<sup>6</sup>

Students' perceptions of their own proficiency levels, and the role of out-of-class contact on their learning experience as a whole (linguistic, cultural, and personal), were considered in detail in order to answer the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ 1: What correlation exists between students' oral proficiency levels as measured by the OPI and their self-evaluation of their oral proficiency?
- RQ 2: What effect does the total amount of out-of-class contact have on students' oral proficiency levels at the end of a sojourn abroad?
- RQ 3: What type of out-of-class contact (interactive or noninteractive) has a greater effect on novice and intermediate students?
- RQ 4: How do students' expectations and perceptions of the role of out-of-class contact relate to their actual exploitation of resources available to them?

Findings

Oral Proficiency and Self-Evaluation

The 43 students interviewed as a part of this study represented a range of oral proficiency levels,<sup>7</sup> as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Student Oral Proficiency Interview levels pre- and post-program, by number of students<sup>8</sup>

Pre-program OPI Level	OPI Level Category	Post-program OPI Level
1 1	Novice/Low	0
1 5	Novice/Mid	1
1 1	Novice/High	1 7
6	Intermediate/Low	1 9
0	Intermediate/Mid	5

Regardless of the level they demonstrated during their oral interviews, pre-program the majority of students tended to self-evaluate themselves one full level higher on the LPSE than their OPI ratings warranted, with 21 of 26 Salamanca Novice-level speakers and all 11 Granada Novice-level speakers evaluating themselves as capable of carrying out Intermediate-level tasks, and four of five Salamanca Intermediate-level speakers evaluating themselves as capable of carrying out Advanced-level tasks. This pattern of overestimation persisted in post-program evaluation: 24 of 31 Salamanca students (11 Novice-level speakers and 13 Intermediate-level speakers) evaluated themselves as capable of carrying out Advanced-level tasks, while nine of ten Granada counterparts (all Intermediate-level speakers but one) interviewed post-program claimed similar Advanced-level abilities. Students appeared to assess their abilities at the highest level they were capable of attaining, rather than that which they were capable of sustaining.<sup>9</sup>

When comparing students' pre-program OPI ratings to item #9 of the Entrance LCP,<sup>10</sup> however, students' modest responses meshed neatly with the levels they demonstrated. Finally, when faced with the third entry of the language journal once they were in Spain, students were more willing to recognize their weaknesses: 36% of Salamanca students and 75% of Granada students admitted once abroad that their level of oral proficiency was not as strong as they had previously predicted. The issue of sojourn length seems to play a role in students' ability to effectively assess their skills. The Granada students responded to this entry after a few weeks of their program rather

than just a few days, and may have already had time by that point to adapt their expectations in agreement with the daily reality they experienced.

### **Out-of-Class Contact and Oral Proficiency**

For both Salamanca and Granada students, there did not appear to exist a relationship between the total number of contact hours reported on the Exit LCP and students' oral proficiency gains. Neither did there appear to exist any relationship between the number of interactive and noninteractive contact hours reported on the Exit LCP and students' oral proficiency gains. Although not explicitly included in RQ2 and RQ3, the number of contact hours (total and interactive/noninteractive) were compared to students' pre-program OPI levels and post-program OPI levels. As concerns students' pre-program OPI levels and total out-of-class contact, the Salamanca students showed about the same amount of contact for Novice-level speakers (NL, NM, NH) but more for the higher Intermediate-level speakers, while the Granada data reflected the inverse: more contact for the lowest level speakers (NL), and about the same amount for the remaining Novice- and Intermediate-level speakers. Students' post-program OPI levels and total out-of-class contact reflected the same pattern; as Salamanca students' contact increased along with their OPI level, Granada students' contact decreased as their OPI levels increased. As concerns students' pre-program OPI levels and interactive/noninteractive out-of-class contact, the Salamanca Intermediate-level speakers reported greater interactive and noninteractive contact than their Novice-level peers, while the Granada Intermediate-level speaker reported slightly more noninteractive contact and less interactive contact than her Novice-level peers. Students' post-program OPI levels and interactive/noninteractive out-of-class contact reflected a similar pattern; the Salamanca Intermediate-level speakers reported greater interactive and noninteractive contact than their Novice-level peers, while the Granada Intermediate-level speakers reported slightly more noninteractive contact and less interactive contact than their Novice-level peer.<sup>11</sup>

### **Perceptions and Experiences**

Students expressed a range of expectations for their time abroad and shared perceptions about their language use and learning in various entries of the language journal, as well as in response to the Entrance and Exit LCP surveys. A brief summary of the most relevant trends is offered here.

#### *Pre-program expectations and goals achieved while abroad*

Prior to their sojourn abroad, over half of Salamanca and Granada students expressed a wish for linguistic improvements, one-quarter desired an

increased sense of confidence using Spanish, and nearly one-quarter of Salamanca students and 17% of Granada students concentrated on more personal goals (greater independence, etc.). One-third of Salamanca students and one-half of Granada students responded with great optimism, often emphasizing a desire to attain “fluency.” Students anticipated the Salamanca and Granada programs would provide ample opportunities for “cultural learning” and an immersion environment, two areas principally linked to potential out-of-class contact and interactions.

Students did not always seem able to turn their expectations and plans into reality during their sojourn abroad, however. Post-program, Salamanca students often expressed mixed reactions, suggesting that despite their improvement they had not entirely realized their goals; while students were proud of their improvement in language skills and a newly formed sense of personal independence, they mentioned more motives for disappointment, which often had to do with a sense of wasted opportunities, continued failure to understand native speakers, or lack of linguistic improvement. The majority of Granada students, on the other hand, were fairly positive about their progress, suggesting that they had met their goals and were in the process of forming new ones to continue their learning. It is possible that their sense of success had to do with their longer sojourn in Spain, which gave them more time to realize their goals, as well as with their initial pre-program formulation of more realistic expectations.

#### *Expected and perceived contributions of classwork/homework versus out-of-class contact*

Both groups of students valued informal contact much more highly than formal contact prior to their time abroad. Nearly two-thirds of Salamanca students and three-quarters of Granada students believed out-of-class contact would have a greater (if not the greatest) effect on their language learning, while the remaining students believed the informal and formal environments would contribute equally.

After their time abroad, however, both groups of students demonstrated an increased appreciation for formal contact. Only two Salamanca students and one Granada student maintained the opinion that out-of-class contact was exclusively responsible for their improvement, roughly one-third of both groups focused on the contributions of classwork (though not exclusively), and roughly one-half of both groups responded with a balanced perspective. It is clear that students adapted their viewpoints about formal and informal contact in agreement with their own individual learning experiences in the host country, coming to respect both types of contact for their respective contributions.

#### *Plans to pursue out-of-class contact and actual pursuit of contact*

Due to the high opinion students had about the benefits of informal contact pre-program, nearly all Salamanca students were ambitious about their potential Spanish

use in the host country, often vowing to communicate in the target language whenever possible and praising the host family environment as conducive to this end. One-half of the Granada students reflected a similar enthusiasm.

Students' new appreciation for formal contact at the close of the program, however, may help explain why so many students reacted negatively when asked about their actual pursuit of contact while abroad. More than two-thirds of the Salamanca students who addressed this theme let their disappointment show when they acknowledged their inability to interact in Spanish as often as they had planned pre-program, citing reasons such as: nervousness, lack of courage, lack of effort, lack of time, "avoidance" of interactions by staying within the comfortable company of English speakers, and a dorm environment unsupportive of Spanish usage. In fact, students mentioned their living situation in the dorms as a possible impediment to their language learning. This was certainly the case with Julia, who observed, "Although living in the *residencia* was more comfortable for me, I wish I had lived with a family. Living with Spanish speakers would have forced me to learn and overcome my reservations and fears about speaking. Hindsight is 20/20. If I ever do a program like this again I will surely live with a family." While nearly two-thirds of Granada students also acknowledged they pursued less contact while abroad than originally expected, they were not as self-critical as their Salamanca counterparts.

#### *Interacting with native speakers & students' second language (L2) use*

When asked about the frequency of their interactions, more than one-third of Salamanca and one-third of Granada students evaluated the time they spent speaking Spanish as "little," one-third of both groups reported a "normal" amount of Spanish speaking contact, and one-third of Granada students mentioned "lots" of interactions (double that of their Salamanca counterparts). Aside from teachers and classmates, 19 of the 26 students who lived with a family in Salamanca and Granada included their hosts in the list of people with whom they spoke the most. Nine Salamanca students and two Granada students listed service personnel, and only three Salamanca students and two Granada students mentioned Spanish friends. The Salamanca students' contact history, a motive of regret for 15 of 19 students who commented on "missed opportunities," was inconsistent with the high opinions two-thirds of these students expressed about the importance of these interactions to their learning. While the Granada students nearly all expressed regret about their "missed opportunities" as well, they did not place the same value on these interactions; less than one-half of students evaluated these as "very important".

While the family environment seems to provide rich opportunities for interaction according to these students, they missed out on connecting with the rest of the population of native speakers around them. Indeed, one-half of the Salamanca students

and eight of nine Granada students remarked that they had spent less time with Spaniards than expected, often because of their socializing with other Americans who attended their program or their language school. Two-thirds of Salamanca students and nearly two-thirds of Granada students reported they spoke the most Spanish in the classroom, most often with classmates and teachers, for one of three main reasons: to practice the L2, for functional purposes, or for socializing. In the case of both groups, one-half of students used the language mainly for practice, one-quarter for functional purposes, and one-quarter for socializing.

Students' feelings about informal encounters with native speakers may also have affected their frequency. One-half of Salamanca students considered the experience to be more difficult than expected, citing reasons for their problems (accent, rate of speech, group dynamics, feelings of frustration and discomfort, etc.), while one-quarter welcomed the challenge, and one-quarter expressed positive reactions about communicating with Spaniards. More than half of Granada students were positive about their interactions, while one-third considered them to be more difficult than expected. Interestingly enough, when asked about their most positive language experience while abroad, nearly three-quarters of Salamanca students and all five of the Granada students mentioned their interactions with native speakers (host families, teachers, vendors, strangers asking for directions, etc.), while only one-quarter of Salamanca students judged their classes to be more positive.

#### *Expectations and reality of life abroad – adjustments & frustrations*

While one-half of Salamanca and one-third of Granada students commented that Spain surpassed their initial expectations, and one-third of Salamanca students considered it equal to their expectations, 10% of Salamanca students and one-half of Granada students expressed their disillusionment through negative comments about their host country. Students' reactions to their environment represented both high and low points on the classic "W" adaptation curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, cited in Pedersen, 1995), suggesting that this cycle varies among individuals in regards to the timing of its stages. This phenomenon is clear in two opposing examples from the Granada program: "After being here for a month and a half, I am in love with it. Everything I imagined is better. I never thought I would meet people from all over the world. I never thought that home wouldn't seem that far away...I want to be able to stay here and travel and learn so much more about Spain and other countries as well [Sandra]." "I didn't expect Spain to seem somewhat less sophisticated than the US. I thought it seemed more glamorous and exotic [Michelle]."

When asked to assess the changes they had gone through, students focused mainly on two areas: one-half of Salamanca students and 40% of Granada students cited linguistic improvements, while one-half of Salamanca students and 60% of Granada students cited emotional/personal changes including increased independence, self-

sufficiency, maturity, and willingness to think with an open mind. While one-half of the Salamanca and Granada students focused on differences in lifestyle that often affected their personal lives (schedule, eating/ sleeping habits, social relations, etc.), five Salamanca students expressed extreme frustration over their limitations with interactions in the target society due to the language barrier. The majority of students reduced their descriptions of Spain to a one-to-two phrase generalization, often troubling for their superficial nature, as in the following comments: "I would describe Spain in most to all positive terms. The weather is better and the food is downright tasty...The sights are amazing as well. The parties are the bomb too [Glen]." "I would describe Spain as a great time, it's like learning while partying [Rob]." Students' frustration with communication failures and their superficial understanding of the host environment could have a negative effect on their ability to interact with native speakers.

### **Additional Findings**

As is so often the case in an extensive research project, the investigator uncovered additional findings during the course of data collection and analysis which were outside the scope of the four research questions summarized earlier. These additional findings deserve special attention for the light they shed on this project and their potential contributions to administrators' and educators' understanding of students' learning abroad. Laubscher (1994) affirmed that "By learning more about what students do outside the classroom, and by finding out if they perceive those activities as supportive of the overall educational effort, we will be able to make more informed judgments about how to integrate that experiential domain more fully into the education abroad enterprise" (p. xvii). Based on this premise, this discussion of additional findings will open with a look at the contact reported by students on their time-place maps and will continue with a review of the most common out-of-class activities reported by students on the Exit LCP.

According to their time-place maps, less than 25% of Salamanca students could claim more than four hours of contact in "Spanish only" during a typical day, while the remaining students ranged between a low of .92 hours and a high of 4 hours. These figures doubled in the case of the Granada students, of whom 50% could claim more than 4 hours of contact in "Spanish only" during a typical day, while the remaining students ranged between a low of 1.75 hours and a high of 4 hours. What did students use Spanish for? In both groups, the majority of students reported speaking a mix of Spanish and English with friends and peers from their program (this accounts for the bulk of their contact hours), and using Spanish in limited spurts to fulfill very specific functions with very specific interlocutors: ordering food in restaurants from waiters or

drinks in bars from bartenders; buying souvenirs, food or clothes from clerks; getting directions from bus drivers or giving them to taxi drivers; making future plans with travel agents; and engaging in limited communication with locals who could not speak English. In the case of Salamanca students, those who lived with host families showed a mean of contact hours 40% greater than that of the students who lived in the dorms.<sup>1 2</sup>

Looking at a breakdown of the interactive activities reported on the Exit LCP, Salamanca students spent 35% of their time speaking during "superficial or brief exchanges" and 32% during "extended conversations," while Granada students spent 38% of their time speaking during "extended conversations" and 32% during "superficial or brief exchanges." When it came to noninteractive activities, listening accounted for 67% of students' contact in both groups, while writing (18%, Salamanca; 15%, Granada) and reading (15%, Salamanca; 18%, Granada) played less important roles. This inequality may in part be explained by the frequency of these types of contact; listening is something students do naturally both in and out of the classroom, while writing and reading in Spanish tend to be the product of course requirements and assignments. For Salamanca students the most popular listening activity (25% of the total hours reported) was "listening to Spanish songs outside of class," while for Granada students "listening to Spanish TV and radio outside of class" was the most common, representing 21% of their contact. The Granada students reported a listening average 14% greater than that of their Salamanca counterparts, possibly because their longer stay in the host environment enabled them to become more "settled" and form routines and relationships which allowed for greater contact. For both groups the most popular reading activity was "reading schedules, announcements, menus and the like in Spanish outside of class," representing 48% of contact for Salamanca students and 40% for Granada students. For both groups the most popular writing activity was "writing homework assignments in Spanish outside of class," representing 60% of contact for Salamanca students and 59% for Granada students. It is interesting to note that despite the differences between the two programs investigated (the Salamanca program lasted one-quarter the duration of the Granada program; all Granada students lived with host families, while half the Salamanca students lived in a dormitory; three times more Salamanca students participated in this study, representing more advanced levels of oral proficiency; etc.), in more than one case their reported contact is very similar, if not identical. Perhaps students' approach to socializing and communicating in Spain accounts for these similar patterns of contact.

The activities listed above accounted for the majority of students' time, but it remains to be seen whether they represent those that contribute most to the improvement of students' skills. Leaving aside individual learning preferences, it is possible that the activities most productive for students' improvement do not correspond with

the activities reported as most common among these groups of students. This is an issue that should be examined more closely in future research, especially since the activities listed above seem fairly consistent in their popularity.

To complement the above summary of out-of-class activities, this discussion of additional findings closes with a look at entry #12 of the language journal, which requested students to identify their “most improved” and “least improved” skills at the close of their sojourn abroad.<sup>13</sup> For the Salamanca students, listening represented their “most improved” skill (55%), followed by speaking (26%), writing (19%), and reading (0%). This pattern was nearly the inverse for Granada students, with speaking (38%) as the “most improved” skill, followed by listening (25%), reading (25%), and writing (12%). The percentages for the Granada students are more evenly distributed among the four skills. For the Salamanca students, speaking represented their “least improved” skill (36%), followed by reading (28%), writing (24%), and listening (12%). This pattern was similar for Granada students, though speaking and writing were reversed, with writing (50%) as the “least improved” skill, followed by reading (20%), speaking (20%), and listening (10%). It should be noted that this time the percentages for the Salamanca students are more evenly distributed among the four skills. Program duration may contribute to students’ improvement or lack thereof, with a longer program allowing more time for students to dedicate to the development of different skills, but program structure and other factors which characterized these two groups in particular (initial oral proficiency levels, goals, attitudes, personality, etc.) may also have played a central role.

## **I m p l i c a t i o n s   a n d   C o n c l u s i o n s**

### **E x p e c t a t i o n s   a n d   A s s u m p t i o n s**

Why did these students venture abroad? Though they had various goals and objectives – fluency, improved language skills, cultural learning and immersion, increased independence and confidence – their fundamental expectation was that the learning context available in Spain would help them to realize these more effectively than on the home campus. Students from both programs clearly expressed this belief in the opening entries of their language journals:

I think that learning a language solely from a book seemed very unnatural and awkward for me. I hope that learning Spanish in Spain will be a different experience for me in language education. I have a feeling that being immersed in an all Spanish-speaking culture will influence my willingness to learn the language and my ability to use and understand the language better. [Rob]

Taking classes in the U.S. never worked for me. I'd really like to truly be able to use the language and furthermore, use it in the more realistic context of living in Spain and needing to speak the language [more] than just using it in class... The best part about being in Spain is the unique opportunity to truly use the language that I'm studying here. Now there is a real purpose to learning Spanish... other than just to pass and get credits. [Kelly]

While these two students outlined realistic expectations and goals, many of their peers expressed opinions pre-program which tended to echo those assumptions Wilkinson (1995) called into question. Table 2 offers some examples of students' pre-program expectations.

Students post-program, however, were not so accepting of these assumptions. Their experience taught them that the reality of study abroad is often very different from the glossy image advertised in program materials, and that there is another side that needs to be faced in order to learn effectively and live in the host culture. Table 3 offers some examples of students' post-program challenges to the assumptions initially identified by Wilkinson.

### **Student Strategies for Learning Abroad**

It is clear from the examples in Table 3 that students do learn from their experiences; still, even the 20/20 vision of "hindsight" is open to interpretation. Do students reinvest their newly-acquired knowledge when they choose to return abroad for future study, or does physical and temporal distance from the sojourn permit students a selective memory? This concern was addressed in this project by the follow-up to the main study, a series of three reflective essays<sup>1,4</sup> completed by five repeat sojourners whose responses demonstrate the wisdom they gleaned from their multiple experiences abroad. This wisdom, complemented by the post-program beliefs of Salamanca and Granada students, can be distilled into a series of five basic premises or learning strategies which students should respect before, during, and after study abroad in order to reap the maximum benefits from their abroad experience:

- I. Information – learn about study abroad and adapt expectations
- II. Integration – acknowledge and avoid the third culture
- III. Interaction – pursue target language contact and communication
- IV. Intention – make a plan and push the comfort zone
- V. Introspection – continually reflect on experiences to put them in perspective

**Table 2: Wilkinson’s assumptions about study abroad and students’ pre-program beliefs**

<i>Assumption</i>	<i>Students’ Pre-program Beliefs</i>
<i>Assumption 1:</i> Study abroad ensures miraculous linguistic gains	“I would like to...learn to speak Spanish fluently. I see myself communicating and understanding Spanish 1000 times better than before” [Isabelle]  “By the time I leave, however, I want to be fluent, to talk and hear the same...So anyway, send me home fluent!” [Laura]
<i>Assumption 2:</i> Increased non-classroom interaction in the target language is inevitable during a stay abroad	“If I am in a place where I have no choice but to use Spanish every day, I am sure I can develop fluency” [Dana]  “I believe my contact with Spanish people and language 24 hours a day will be the cause for this [language learning]” [Ryan]  “...my hope is that the language will come very naturally” [Jerome]
<i>Assumption 3:</i> A host family is preferable to other possible living arrangements	“I hope to participate in daily activities with my host family and I am sure these experiences will help with my immersion into the Spanish language” [Ellen]  “I feel that because I will be living with a family, this will benefit me greatly. I will be forced to interact with others” [Theresa]
<i>Assumption 4:</i> Deep cultural understanding will result from residence in a foreign country	“I get to see an entirely different culture from a point of view that a lot of people do not get to see. I get to experience this different way of life and be totally immersed” [Melanie]  “I hope to...learn more about Spain, people, and myself. I also want to have fun and become more ‘cultured’ “ [Gina]
<i>Assumption 5:</i> Participants whose experiences contradict the above expectations are themselves deficient	“... my greatest fear is that I will not be able to achieve what I have mentioned...my brain will just shut off and I’ll not be able to understand anything, not be able to learn anything new, or get bad grades” [Brian]  “Unfortunately, I don’t think I pursued enough out-of-class contact because I was nervous about not understanding or running out of things to say” [Alex]  “Despite my attempts to assimilate to the language and culture, I’m so obviously a ‘stupid American’...At times it was lack of courage for me” [Julia]

**Table 3: Wilkinson's assumptions about study abroad and students' post-program beliefs**

<i>Assumption</i>	<i>Students Challenging these Assumptions, Post-program</i>
<i>Assumption 1:</i> Study abroad ensures miraculous linguistic gains	<p>"Studying abroad is a huge adjustment to begin with. Surviving in another country/culture is what I concentrated on – learning some Spanish was what happened in the meantime" [Vanessa]</p> <p>"When I first arrived I don't think I realized how difficult it was to pick up the language. Learning Spanish was a lot more difficult than I thought" [Lindsey]</p>
<i>Assumption 2:</i> Increased non-classroom interaction in the target language is inevitable during a stay abroad	<p>"I avoided the necessity of speaking the language too many times by staying within the company of English speakers or those who could speak on my behalf" [Tim]</p> <p>"I didn't pursue as much out-of-class contact because Spanish people seemed like they didn't want to talk to anyone (generalization but still)" [Sandra]</p> <p>"In general people aren't so interesting. I expected people to want to chat more and be more friendly" [Gina]</p>
<i>Assumption 3:</i> A host family is preferable to other possible living arrangements	<p>"...living with a neurotic 65 year-old woman is quite intense. I don't feel comfortable showering or even eating a piece of fruit. She feels is necessary to involve herself in all my activities. I haven't had someone stick their (her) nose so far up my a— ever!" [Gina]</p> <p>"It [the dorm] was a daily break I needed and allowed me to appreciate Spain more as I thrive on meeting people" [Rachel]</p>
<i>Assumption 4:</i> Deep cultural understanding will result from residence in a foreign country	<p>"It's hard to adjust to a place you really know nothing about" [Melanie]</p> <p>"Cultural changes are pretty obvious with the daily schedule 'siesta'. My friends and I have adopted the 'double kisses' " [Greg]</p> <p>"I can appreciate the Spanish culture, but I miss American food, people, language, and nightlife... the greatest change so far is having more appreciation for my own culture" [Vanessa]</p>
<i>Assumption 5:</i> Participants whose experiences contradict the above expectations are themselves deficient	<p>"Before I came, I had a lot of bad feelings about the fact that I didn't know how to learn Spanish – I had very low esteem about my learning capacity for languages... Living in another country has given me a much needed world perspective... know that, yes, you will make mistakes, but 99% of the time, no one cares!" [Kelly]</p> <p>"...for my first time abroad I did a lot just coming out here and living somewhere else" [Anne]</p>

These learning strategies are reflected in comments students made about their experiences abroad, both in response to the LCP questionnaires and in language journal entries, as shown in Table 4. Curiously enough, what these students have figured out on their own is precisely what well-known professionals in the field recommend when proposing ways to improve experiences abroad. Storti, in the second edition of his book *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, addresses all five premises under different headings, as necessary components of a successful sojourn.

### **Current Initiatives in the Field**

The best way to confront the assumptions identified by Wilkinson and pass on the “wisdom” shared by experienced students and professionals is to prepare future participants for a venture whose very nature is challenging, guide them through it, and help them to put it all in perspective at the close. Some students seem able to deduce the five premises of study abroad proposed in the previous section, and learn by doing. However, intervention on the part of educators and administrators may be necessary to set this process in motion, as well as support students’ continual interpretation of the reality they observe. Such integration of all three phases of the study abroad process has been noted and addressed by several colleges and universities, with one of the earliest models originating at the University of the Pacific, where students have been required for years to take courses both preceding and following their sojourn abroad.<sup>15</sup>

There are a number of current initiatives in the field which offer a new take on the University of the Pacific’s classic approach to intercultural learning in study abroad. A few which deserve further attention from the reader include: The Kalamazoo Project for Intercultural Communication, launched in 2002 by Kalamazoo College; the University of Minnesota’s recent publication of the *Maximizing Study Abroad* series, created as part of a project sponsored by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) and supported in part by the U.S. Department of Education Language Resource Center program; and Bruce La Brack’s new on-line cross-cultural training resource “What’s Up with Culture?” These initiatives present the essential topics of basic intercultural training in a straightforward manner, while respecting the considerations set out in its underlying theories. Every program has a responsibility to prepare its students and support them throughout their study abroad experience, and these initiatives accept the challenge. The richness of their materials and resources reflects the dynamism of the field and leaves little room for excuses, despite the oft cited lack of time and resources. While a full description of these materials is not feasible here, details can be easily accessed on-line.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 4:** *Student comments about strategies for learning abroad*

<i>Learning Strategies</i>	<i>Student Comments</i>
I. <i>Information – learn about study abroad and adapt expectations</i>	<p>“This is a constant struggle for me (it has been here as well as in Salamanca) that I want to learn so much, and I set my expectations very high, but then I’m constantly fighting against the clock (and other factors) to try and accomplish it” [Brian]</p> <p>“I would recommend that they study up on Salamanca” [Glen]</p> <p>“When I arrived I knew I wanted to make more contact with Spaniards but I wasn’t sure how” [Nick]</p>
II. <i>Integration – acknowledge and avoid the third culture</i>	<p>“I didn’t pursue as much out-of-class contact as I should have. I spent all my time with students from my program” [Melanie]</p> <p>“It’s difficult because there are many things I want to talk about, things that are on my mind, and I can’t yet really express them in Spanish and it creates a great feeling of loneliness, which is why, I believe, so many students turn to their American friends to express themselves (in English)... “ [Brian]</p>
III. <i>Interaction – pursue target language contact and communication</i>	<p>“I would also encourage them to go out and interact as much as possible because that is the best part” [Alex]</p> <p>“To get the most out of the time in Salamanca I would suggest try to talk to or go out with as many locals as possible” [Justin]</p> <p>“...if I do study abroad again, I will try my best to meet as many people as possible – it really not only helps with language and having friends but it allows you to see parts of the culture that you just can’t see if you don’t have friends from within” [Nick]</p>
IV. <i>Intention – make a plan and push the comfort zone</i>	<p>“To get the most out of their time I’d say: do cultural things, WHEN IN ROME...Don’t be scared to do things you don’t normally do” [Isabelle]</p> <p>“Try not to put things off for “another day” so that you don’t regret not getting to do something in the end” [Danielle]</p> <p>“By taking advantage of things like the gym, and possibly a PE course offered in May...I am going to try, for better or worse, to ‘put myself where the action is’ into situations that involve confrontational interface with actual Spaniards more than just shopkeepers/teachers/host family” [Dan]</p>
V. <i>Introspection – continually reflect on experiences to put them in perspective</i>	<p>“Take lots of pictures and journal. It is a good way to remember your time here” [Theresa]</p> <p>“...remember this program is not only about learning Spanish it is about learning about yourself and another culture” [Angela]</p> <p>“I’ve been able to learn from my self-disappointments – things that I would have done differently in Salamanca had I the chance to do it all over again...Learning from my mistakes (and I’m being extremely self-critical in saying that) there are things that I would try to avoid... I don’t know that I’ll have another chance to study abroad again, but if I did I would certainly do it. And if I did I would approach it differently yet again. Because I would now be applying both my Salamanca and Oviedo experiences” [Brian]</p>

## **Recommendations and Questions for Further Research**

Few researchers have attempted to propose pedagogical methods to address the issues which seem to characterize students' sojourns abroad. This project represents a concerted effort to research students' oral proficiency and out-of-class contact using both quantitative and qualitative measures to gain a richer portrait of students' non-academic activities abroad and how these could be more effectively supported by educators and administrators. Several questions which surfaced during the research process remain unanswered at the close of this investigation. These are outlined here in the hopes that future research will take them into consideration when designing prospective studies.

As a point of departure, specific activities included in the Exit LCP could be examined for their effect on oral proficiency gains. Knowing which activities contribute significantly would allow educators and administrators to target these for deliberate inclusion in the experiential activities students are encouraged to carry out as part of their "continuous orientation." Which activities contribute more to students' improvement? Do those activities coincide with the activities in which students report engaging the most? Do specific activities have a greater influence on students with lower or higher initial oral proficiency levels?

Another issue which requires further examination is sojourn length. While the Salamanca and Granada students often shared similar opinions, their self-report data on the LPSE, LCP, and various entries of the language journal sometimes reflected patterns which ranged from slightly different to opposite. More thorough research should be conducted to more effectively compare and contrast the summer and semester abroad experiences of students. How do students form expectations and goals for these sojourns, define key concepts such as "fluency" and "success," and approach out-of-class contact? How does this out-of-class contact affect their oral proficiency? Do students benefit more from interactive or noninteractive contact depending on their initial OPI level? How do students work towards the realization of their goals and adapt their expectations during the sojourn? How do they perceive their experiences at different stages of the cycle?

Finally, once initiatives have been put in place to improve student support and offer more "continuous orientation," further research must be conducted to measure their effectiveness.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This figure, the latest available from the Open Doors 2003 survey (<http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=36524>), shows an increase of 7.2% from the 2000-2001 academic year.

<sup>2</sup> This self-appraisal scale of language proficiency, developed by ETS for Education and the World View, a two-year project of the Council on Learning (1978-1980), consists of “can do” statements assessing language ability and has 14 items representing levels of proficiency of increasing complexity ranging from “Count to ten in the language,” to “Buy clothes in a department store,” to “Describe your present job, studies, or other major life activities accurately and in detail,” to “Describe the system of government of your country.” This scale was used in the well-known Study Abroad Evaluation Project (SAEP) published by Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz in 1990 (pp. 44-53).

<sup>3</sup> Both LCPs are under copyright by Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter (2001) and were used with permission of Dr. Freed and her colleagues.

<sup>4</sup> Although the language journal employed in this study draws on previous work such as the ACTR/NFLC Project and Wilkinson (1995) to formulate questions for students to respond to at regularly spaced intervals during their sojourn abroad, the researcher also drew on her own experiences with students abroad and information presented at NAFSA conferences to re-work some of the ideas included.

<sup>5</sup> On the time-place maps students were asked to account for all their interactions on a given day, listing the following: the length of the interaction, where it took place, with whom they were speaking, what language(s) they used, and any additional notes they considered necessary. This instrument has been used in previous studies, including the ACTR/NFLC project and Wilkinson (1995).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of this study’s design and findings, please refer to Mendelson (2004); complete copies of most instruments are also available in the same volume.

<sup>7</sup> A full description of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines can be found at [www.actfl.org/files/public/Guidelinespeak.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/files/public/Guidelinespeak.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The post-program numbers total 42 students, because one skipped his post-program interview.

<sup>9</sup> Aside from basic differences between the instruments, this phenomenon of overestimation may have been exacerbated by the equivalencies scale created to compare OPI and LPSE ratings. A full discussion of possibilities and limitations is available in Mendelson (2004).

<sup>10</sup> On item #9 of the Entrance LCP students were asked to rate their language ability according to a scale of “poor, good, very good, native/native-like.”

<sup>11</sup> These relationships should be considered in agreement with their context, which shows that the numbers of Novice- and Intermediate-level speakers are rarely balanced: pre-program there were 26 Salamanca and 8 Granada Novice-level speakers, and only 5 Salamanca and 1 Granada Intermediate-level speakers, while post-program there were 17 Salamanca and 1 Granada Novice-level speakers, and 14 Salamanca and 8 Granada Intermediate-level speakers.

<sup>12</sup> While this supports students’ beliefs about the benefits of a host family living environment, evident in opinions expressed by both groups both pre- and post-program, the dorm was also

appreciated for its more relaxed atmosphere. It comes down to a question of preferences and goals for both learning and living.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note at the outset, however, that students' skills are influenced (positively and negatively) by their formal and informal learning environments, and that this discussion does not claim to establish direct relationships between the most popular out-of-class activities and students' skills improvement.

<sup>14</sup> The follow-up essays included the following series of questions: 1) Taking into account what you have learned from your previous study abroad experience, how do you plan to approach this second study abroad experience differently to maximize your success? 2) How is your sojourn in Oviedo different from your previous study abroad experience so far? Are you experiencing/pursuing more regular contact with Spaniards this time around? 3) Do you feel you got more out of this study abroad experience than the previous one? Why or why not? Do you plan to study abroad again in the future? If so, will you approach the experience differently next time?

<sup>15</sup> These courses were initially designed by Dr. Bruce La Brack. Full syllabi are available online at: [www.lmu.edu/global/safeti/orientation.html](http://www.lmu.edu/global/safeti/orientation.html)

<sup>16</sup> The Kalamazoo Project for Intercultural Communication, <http://www.kzoo.edu/cip/kpic>; CARLA's *Maximizing Study Abroad...* series, <http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/guides.html>; Bruce La Brack's on-line cross-cultural training resource "What's Up with Culture?", <http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture/index.htm>

## References

- Archangeli, M. (1999). Study abroad and experiential learning in Salzburg, Austria. *Foreign Language Annals*, 32(1), 115-125.
- Brecht, R.D., & Robinson, J.L. (1993). Qualitative analysis of second language acquisition in study abroad: The ACTR/NFLC Project. *NFLC Occasional Papers*. Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Language Center.
- Brecht, R.D., Davidson, D.E., & Ginsberg, R.B. (1995). Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 37-66). Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.
- Breiner-Sanders, K., Lowe, P., Miles, J., & Swender, E. (2000). ACTFL proficiency guidelines – speaking, revised 1999. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33(1), 13-18.
- Carlson, J., Burn, B., Useem, J., & Yachimowicz, D. (1990). *Study abroad: The experience of American undergraduates*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition. (2003). *Maximizing study abroad: Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*. Retrieved February 7, 2004, from <http://www.carla.umn.edu/mxsa/guides.html>
- Citron, J.L. (2002). U.S. students abroad: Host culture integration or third culture formation? In W. Grünzweig & N. Rinehart (Eds.), *Rockin' in Red Square: Critical approaches to international education in the age of cyberculture* (pp. 41-56). Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag.

- DeKeyser, R. (1990). From learning to acquisition? Monitoring in the classroom and abroad. *Hispania*, 73, 238-247
- DeKeyser, R. (1991). The semester overseas: What difference does it make? *ADFL Bulletin*, 22(2), 42-48.
- Freed, B. (1990). Language learning in a study abroad context: The effects of interactive and non-interactive out-of-class contact on grammatical achievement and oral proficiency. In J. Alatis (Ed.), *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics* (pp. 459-477). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Freed, B. (1995b). What makes us think students who study abroad become fluent? In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 123-148). Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.
- Institute of International Education. (2003). *Open Doors 2003: American students studying abroad*. Retrieved February 7, 2004, from <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=36524>
- Kalamazoo College. (2003). *Kalamazoo project for intercultural communication (KPIC)*. Retrieved February 7, 2004, from <http://www.kzoo.edu/cip/kpic>
- Kaplan, M.A. (1989). French in the community: A survey of language use abroad. *The French Review*, 63(2), 290-301.
- La Brack, B. (2003). *What's up with culture? On-line cultural training resource for study abroad*. Retrieved February 7, 2004, from <http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture/index.htm>
- Lafford, B. (1995). Getting into, through and out of a survival situation: A comparison of communicative strategies used by students studying Spanish abroad and 'at home'. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 97-122). Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.
- Laubscher, M.R. (1994). *Encounters with difference: Student perceptions of the role of out-of-class experiences in education abroad*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Liskin-Gasparro, J.E., & Urdaneta, L. (1995). Language learning in a semester abroad: The spring 1995 University of Iowa universidad del los andes program in Mérida, Venezuela. In *Proceedings of the annual symposium on research perspectives in adult language learning and acquisition (RP-ALLA)* (pp. 138-180). Columbus: The Ohio State University National Foreign Language Resource Center.
- Mendelson, V.G. (2004). *Spain or bust? Assessment and student perceptions of out-of-class contact and oral proficiency in a study abroad context*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Miller, L. & Ginsberg, R.B. (1995). Folklinguistic theories of language learning. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 293-315). Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.

- Paige, R.M., Cohen, A.D., Kappler, B., Chi, J., & Lassegard, J. (2002). *Maximizing study abroad: A students' guide to strategies for language and culture learning and use*. Minneapolis: Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota.
- Parr, P. (1988). *Second language acquisition and study abroad: The immersion experience*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California.
- Pedersen, P. (1995). *The five stages of culture shock: Critical incidents around the world*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Spada, N. (1984). *The interaction between type of instruction, informal contact, learner opinions and second language proficiency*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.
- Storti, C. (2001a). *The art of crossing cultures* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Wilkinson, S. (1995). *Foreign language conversation and the study abroad transition: A case study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998a). Study abroad from the participants' perspective: A challenge to common beliefs. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(1), 23-40.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998b). On the nature of immersion during study abroad: Some participant perspectives. *Frontiers: The interdisciplinary journal of study abroad*, 4(2), 121-138.
- Yager, K. (1998). Learning Spanish in Mexico: The effect of informal contact and student attitudes on language gain. *Hispania*, 81(4), 898-914.